

# Work in Progress: Reading and Representing Paris Virtually

by Brian Gordon Kennelly

*Vois-je une Roue ardente, ou bien  
une Fournaise?*

Alfred de Vigny, "Paris"

**T**HE GODDESS OF PARIS portrayed in Walter Benjamin's review of Marthe Bibesco's 1928 novel *Catherine-Paris* rests dramatically in her boudoir surrounded by a sea of print:

A marble fireplace, molding, swelling cushions, animal skins adorning divan and plaster floor. And knick-knacks everywhere. Models of the Bridge of the Arts and the Eiffel Tower. On the pedestal, to keep alive the memory of so rich a past, the Tuileries, the Temple, and the Château d'Eau in miniature. In a vase the ten lilies of the city's coat of arms. Yet all this picturesque bric-a-brac is heightened, trumped, buried by the overwhelming multitude of books in a thousand formats—sextodecimos, duodecimos, octavos, quartos, and folios, of every size and color—presented to her by airborne, illiterate amoretti, poured out by fauns from the cornucopias of the portiers, spread before her by kneeling genies: the homage of the whole planet in literary production. (Witte 180)

Were Benjamin's "bibliographic" allegory (Boyer 47) to be applied to the *grande dame* of French cities today, it would seem dated, outmoded. As we usher in the new millenium, the myriad books that almost a century ago represented the heightening, trumping, burying of the picturesque bric-a-brac for Benjamin's capital of the nineteenth century (*Passagen-Werk*) are increasingly being replaced by electronic successors. We live in a time that follows the shift to the information paradigm. Information circulates, N. Katherine Hayles notes, "as the currency of the realm" (69). Ours is an age where electronic communication will eclipse print, Nelly Furman warns (69). Extended before the divinity is not the print culture homage of a whole planet in literary production but the myriad electronic gateways of a vast, mind-boggling network—the haphazard, associational links of cyberspace.

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson asks in her recent study of Paris as "revolution" how and where Paris was a century ago. How, she wonders, was the French capital represented and known in the nineteenth century? How was it to be imagined and defined? In one hundred years or so, one might very well ask similar questions of the Paris of today.

But why wait? With increasing marginalization (Bolter 2) of the printed page, and given the growing number of websites with the City of Lights as theme, focus, meeting place, or even modifiable piece of cyberspace "published" online by information technology specialists and amateurs alike, we already have ample examples for study. Some hundred years after what Ferguson sees as the metaphoric networks that reassembled Paris, with books soon likely to become little more than "curious objets d'art" (Furman 71), and with the number of sites consulted or "visited" on or through our computer screens—the "hypertexts" (Landow 57–60) we read more often, and typically at the expense of their print-based predecessors—increasing, does the "virtual" Paris, the city as it is represented on the World Wide Web both containing and reducing it, have any recurring, any identifiable features?

In the Preface to the eleventh edition of his handbook for travelers to Paris (published in 1894), Karl Baedeker writes that there is probably no city in the world that has ever undergone transformations as gigantic superficially as the French metropolis during the reign of Napoleon III. Few cities, he observes, have ever experienced as appalling a series of disasters as those which befell France's capital from 1870–71:

Many squalid purlieus, teeming with poverty and vice, were swept away under the imperial régime, to make room for spacious squares, noble avenues, and palatial edifices. The magnificent metamorphosis of Paris "from brick to marble" was nearly complete when the gay, splendour-loving, pleasure-seeking city was overtaken by the Franco-Prussian war and the Communist rebellion. During that period the city sustained many irreparable losses, but since the restoration of peace it has in most respects resumed its former appearance, the government having done its utmost to restore everything as far as possible to its former condition. (v-vi)

By the turn of last century, the French government had striven largely through concrete reconstruction to erase the ravages of bellicose times. Paris had, it appeared, been restored to the magnificence which, before the irreparable losses it had suffered, had made it the envy of the rest of the world, "pivot de la France . . . axe immortel . . . du monde" (Vigny 110). Now, as the twentieth century gradually slips from our collective conscience, electronic advances and the virtual (re)construction they invite allow us to substitute images for direct experience, to embrace a recursive structure, a "technological space-time" (Virilio 18) that might be divided between the "real" and the "deferred" or "replayed" (Boyer 243).

On the simultaneously touted and much maligned information super-highway of the late age of print, the image substitution, the space-time of the informational French capital can be located in two types of website: on the one hand, those that are little more than electronic adaptations, or versions of print-based resources, do not fully exploit the interactivity of the hypermedium, and are often incomplete; or, on the other, those that are interactive but at the same time risk misrepresenting, if not erasing the "real" Paris at the expense of a constantly changing electronic one.

*où prend-on que le concret soit le réel?*

Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*

One of the exploitable features of hypertext, George Landow tells us, is that in prompting, indeed requiring writerly engagement, it also democratizes text. Its multiplicity, which appears in myriad links to individual blocks of text and thus radically changes the experiences that reading, writing, and text signify, calls for an active reader:

The presence of multiple reading paths, which shift the balance between reader and writer, thereby creating Barthes's writerly text, also creates a text that exists far less independently of commentary, analogues, and traditions than does printed text. This kind of democratization not only reduces the hierarchical separation between the so-called main text and the annotation, which now exist as independent texts, reading units, or lexias, but it also blurs the boundaries of individual texts. In so doing, electronic linking reconfigures our experience of both author and authorial property, and this recognition of these ideas promises to affect our conceptions of both the authors (and authority) of texts we study and of ourselves as authors. (5, 25, 57)

Even though internauts, readers of webpages, can change the size and even style of font to facilitate reading, can open several windows at a time, juxtapose several texts on the computer screen, and can choose which hotlinks to follow and usually in what order, few Paris-oriented websites invite, encourage, much less integrate the kind of boundariless commentary that Landow hails as an example of the democratized hypertext. In fact, the majority of websites showcasing some aspect of Paris are little more than repackaged, glitzy versions of the guidebooks, brochures, and magazines that in the past one might have consulted in libraries, purchased at bookstores, borrowed from friends, or ordered by mail. In addition to the ecological benefits derived from the dissemination of tourist information, for example, in digital rather than print form (less deforestation and a greener planet, for instance), its availability online makes it much more rapidly updatable and available to web-surfers the world over. But seldom are these updates instantaneous or "democratic," and rare are the sites dependent for their shape, their growth, their very vitality on their visitor/co-authors.

The Fashion T.V. Paris site,<sup>1</sup> my first example, both capitalizes on the

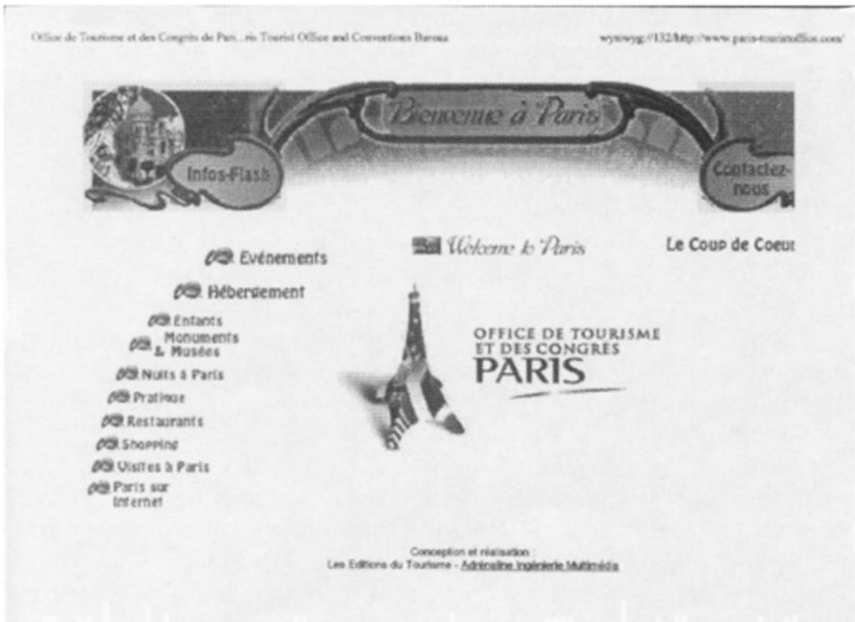
city's reputation as a—if not the—sartorial capital of the world and digitally “enacts” the unilateral repackaging of the old in the new we have described. Although ultimately an electronic “audiencing system” through which we gain access to Paris (Virilio), here the Arc de Triomphe is flaunted as the privileged entrance point to a world that promotes change but cannot deny permanence, “ce vieux toujours nouveau, ce nouveau toujours vieux” (Ivernel 272). Flashing and in capital letters, as though larger than life, the designer names Versace, Chanel, Dior, Gautier, and Givenchy are the passwords permitting the internaut entrance—as spectator-visitor only—into the magical, musical world of glamor and style that is on display for all the world to see on Fashion T.V. Like these names that have been transformed into brands, if not status symbols, here Paris—with the Champs-Élysées at its center—is an electronic runway on which cultures merge in the worldliness of *haute couture*, where spring blends with fall and summer with winter in the never-ending e-commerce of display.

My next two examples are from official Paris websites designed primarily to attract visitors and business. They thus conceive of the city as profit center. In the “real” Paris, visitors and businesspeople play an active role not only with regard to the economic health of the city but also with regard to its growth and continual reshaping. However, in these cyberspace representations, which again repackage the old (monuments, museums, history) in the new (iconic hotlinks leading to cyberspace representations of Paris), indeed blur the two, with the trope of metonymy, which a century ago spurred the Parisian metamorphosis (Ferguson) and having survived the test of time and new technologies, still serving a useful marketing function, the internaut's role is far less active.

The website of the Paris Office de Tourisme et des Congrès,<sup>2</sup> my second example of a digitally repackaged French capital, incompletely frames the century-old Eiffel Tower, symbol of ascent and modernity, within a partial arch of hotlinks that both invites descent into its heart and permits a virtual bird's eye view of all it has to offer. Here languages are fused (the English “Welcome to Paris” with hotlinks in French). Industrial-age metal is draped, revested in the internationalistic colors of the World Wide Web. The inanimate is blended with the animate and the physical with the nonphysical: monuments, museums, restaurants, and shops—all accessible through the Guimardian métro signs advertising them—are given the same status as children; events, lodging, and nights one might spend in Paris are all, moreover, of the same category as “practical” Paris, as the more general “visits” of the French capital. And as though not already part of it—just as commentary by cybervisitors can never be in unilateral, undemocratic sites such as this—all of these Parisian possibilities have the same status as the electronic entranceway to “Paris sur Internet.”

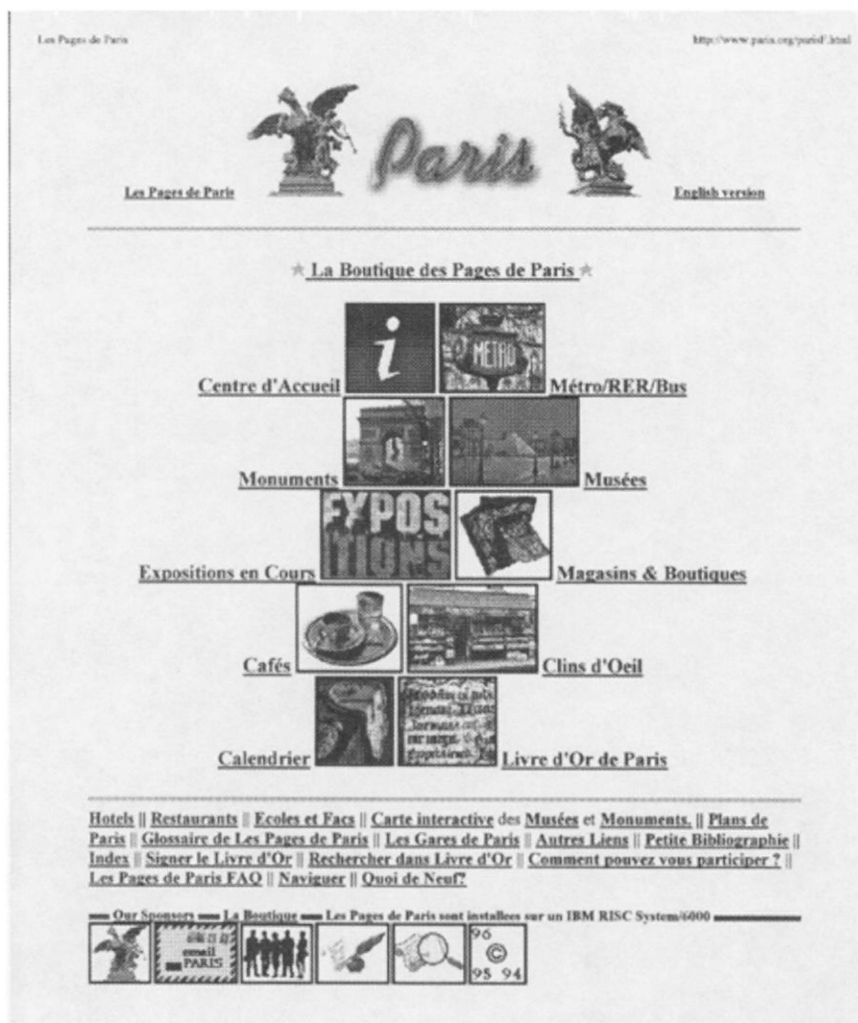
Typically, the deferred or replayed time-space of the abundant websites

Figure 1



on or about Paris in existence today readily lends itself to the unexpected. Clicking on “Les Pages de Paris,”<sup>3</sup> the third example we will study, would yield the following. The first link on the page (“La Boutique des Pages de Paris”) is curiously located above—or before—the virtual help desk (“Centre d’Accueil”). Moreover, it is framed between two gold stars, as if a key for how to “read” the website as a whole; it is as though it were a subtitle for the italicized “Paris” (framed above it between winged statues). But a click on it recently revealed it to be temporarily “closed”. This temporary “deferral” of access is interestingly both spatiotemporal and linguistic; the explanation, or justification given for it is entirely in English and found beneath a bilingual caption for the image of the booksellers of the sixth arrondissement’s Quai des Grands Augustins. It ultimately prompts a misreading of the French capital. Compartmentalized in the ten “boutiques”—iconicized loci or points of intersection between exposition and selling which are also the focal point of the website and yet noticeably miscentered—here, as the site of instability, “Paris” risks misperception. At the same time as its democratization falls far short of expectations, leaving the cybervisitor out in the cold, the virtual French capital thus exemplifies the fundamentally altered relation of signified to signifier. Indeed, on our computer screens

Figure 2



the City of Lights is the digital stage for unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, dispersions, or “flickering signifiers” (Hayles 76).

A fourth example of how extant websites publicizing Paris neither take full advantage of the interactivity of the hypertextual medium nor realistically represent the most visited city in the world is the Paris by the Water website,<sup>4</sup> which is described by search engines as a site of “virtual walks” through Paris. Were one to follow the fountains and bridges of the French capital, to enjoy the panoramic views of its historic monuments,

Figure 3

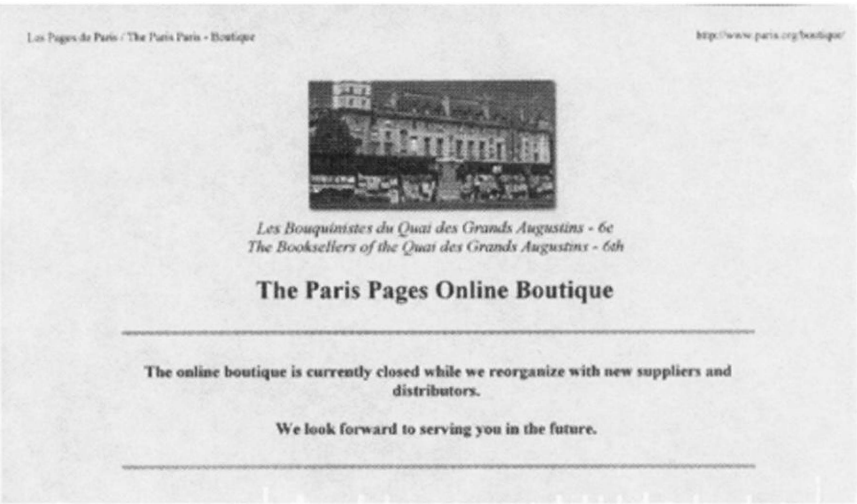
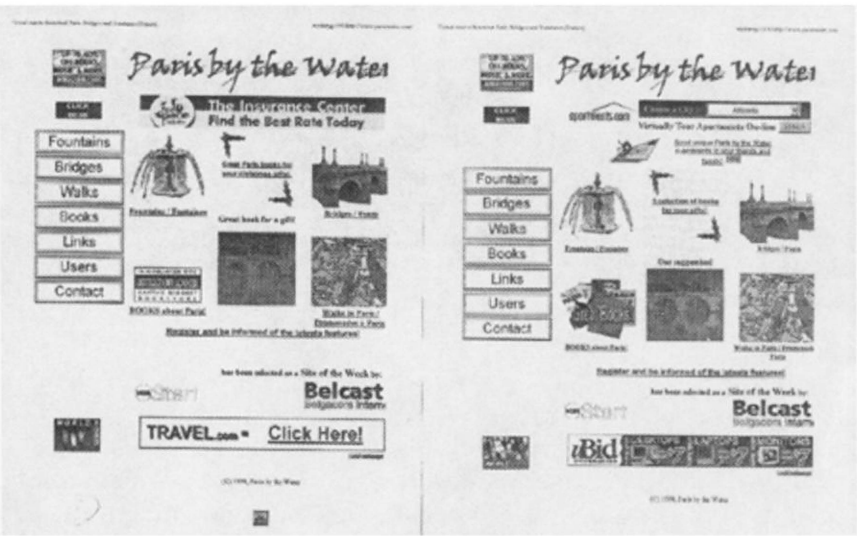


Figure 4



(November 1998)

(December 1998)

one could easily see how profoundly linked it is to the water running through it (Nomade France). The reality behind the virtuality, however, is that less than half of the site's links have any direct relationship to its aquatic theme and that again the internaut is unable publicly to add to the site, extend its features, its lexias, and thereby make it more than it was when s/he—or others—began first to visit, to read it. In addition to those links inviting visitors to consider touring "Fountains/Fontaines," "Bridges/Ponts," and "Walks in Paris/Promenades à Paris," one might also be tempted by the visually appealing advertisements that pepper the screen. Just a click away, one would stray from the digital shores of the Seine and the quaint fountains of the various *arrondissements*; the hat of virtual tourist would be replaced with that of wide-eyed e-consumer. Visitors might be invited to click on the punctuationally more dramatic "Great Paris books for your christmas [*sic*] gifts!", "A Selection of books for your gifts!", "BOOKS about Paris!", or the hyperbolically richer "Best [Insurance] Rate Today" and "EARTH'S BIGGEST BOOKSTORE." On the one hand, crass commercialization such as this helps pay the virtual "rent" of unofficial sites such as this one. Without funding from the state to support them, civilian *webmestres* understandably turn elsewhere for monetary help. On the other hand, corporate sponsorships typically detract from the *raison d'être* of such sites—in the case of Paris by Water, to celebrate a city shaped, illuminated, defined by water.

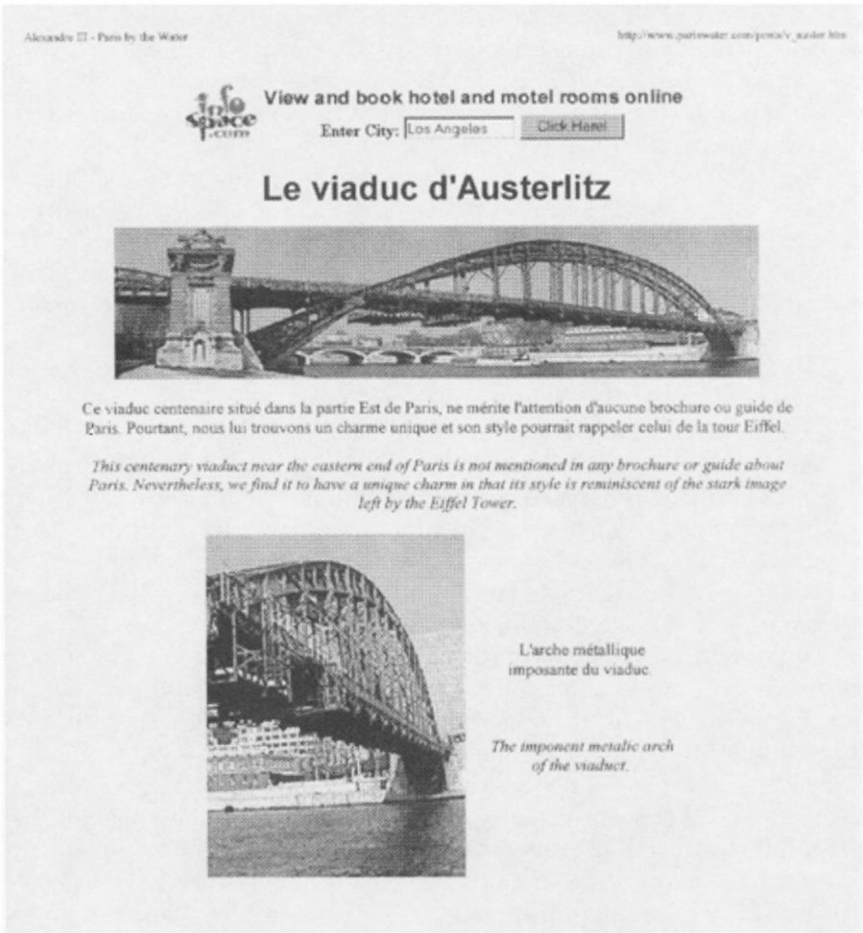
Now should one manage to overlook the advertisements for books, postcards, insurance, auctions, apartments, travel, and gateways which change as sponsors for the site come and go, should one click one's way through the city, one would soon discover the iconicized and much publicized "Paris" by the water to be both novel and incomplete. On a tour of the bridges of Paris, for instance, were one to click on the image of the Austerlitz Viaduct and to read beyond the advertisement for hotel and motel rooms "sponsoring" it, one would learn that this bridge is ordinarily not included in the print-based brochures or guides that have traditionally represented the capital.

Yet just because such bridges and the fountains like them have "unique charm" and have merited recuperation in cyberspace does not guarantee Paris necessarily to be any more complete. In fact, as Ackbar Abbas notes, the way cities have been made to appear in many representations actually works to make them disappear (445). As an example, the plural title "Walks in Paris/Promenades à Paris" is misleading. A click away, one discovers only one option: "Paris Impérial." This sole available walk showcases many of the attractions and monuments constructed for the various "Expositions" which in the past afforded the French capital myriad opportunities to put itself on display for all the world.

Perhaps the "Users" link offers a more accurate, if not revealing window into the ephemerality and one-sidedness of sites such as this. Here—in what could have been a space for interactivity—the virtual visitor is

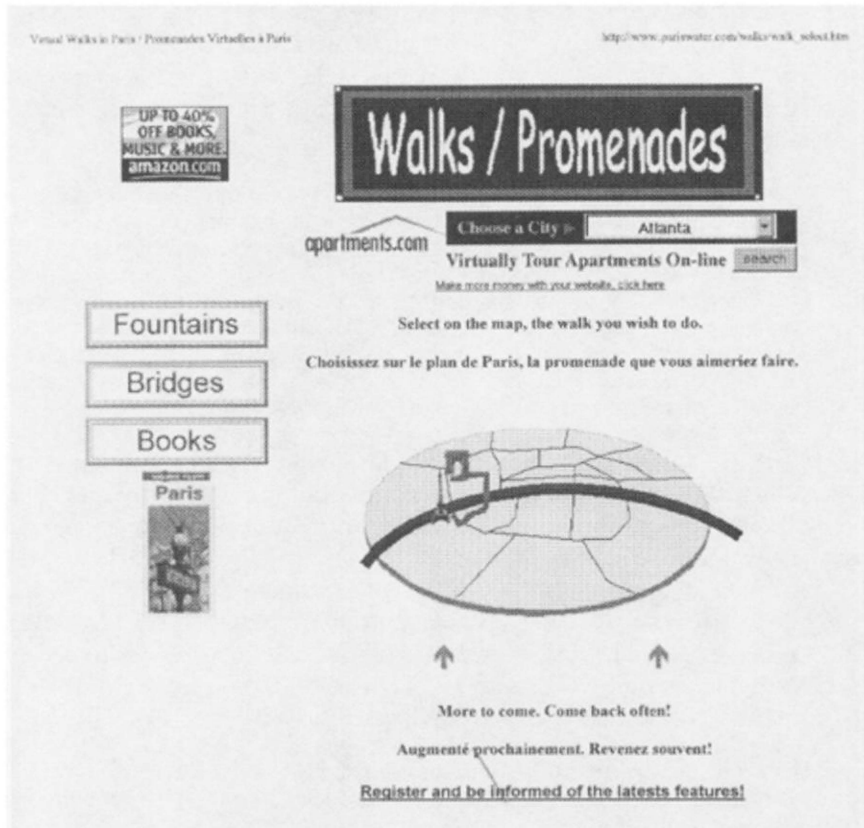


Figure 5



told that by being added to the Paris by the Water mailing list, s/he will be notified each time the site receives a major update or a new feature. Instead of a site of permanence, the fragmented “Paris” contained in the numerous websites that are similarly inspired and constructed is, it appears, very much a capital under construction by webmasters alone, one where the internaut is little more than a spectator-visitor and certainly nothing like Landow’s active, writerly reader who can publicly assume an authorial role by attaching links or adding material to the text being read (57).

Figure 6



*Oh! Vous ferez tout Paris sans rien trouver. Ce qui  
ne se rencontre pas ici, ne se rencontre nulle part!*  
Jules Verne, *Paris au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*

Of course, the reader could do all of these things, on his/her computer—but in private, assuming that s/he had saved copies of the webpages to be altered beforehand. In order publicly to play the role of active, writerly reader, s/he would either have to create a mirror site and then modify it or need permission to publish his/her modifications to the server on which the original webpages are hosted. One could well imagine the consequences, indeed the havoc that could be wreaked were websurfing also to permit more public editing, annotation, or interactive publishing.<sup>5</sup> The

website dedicated to Paris that comes the closest to this kind of interactivity, that most fully pushes the internaut to an actively public writerly role, is *Le Deuxième Monde*.<sup>6</sup>

In a review of this "second" world which was published in *Le Monde*—the print-based newspaper whose name in light of it seems ironically anachronistic—Sébastien Lubrano describes this entirely digital French capital reconceived for our times as being stripped of the signs of real life:

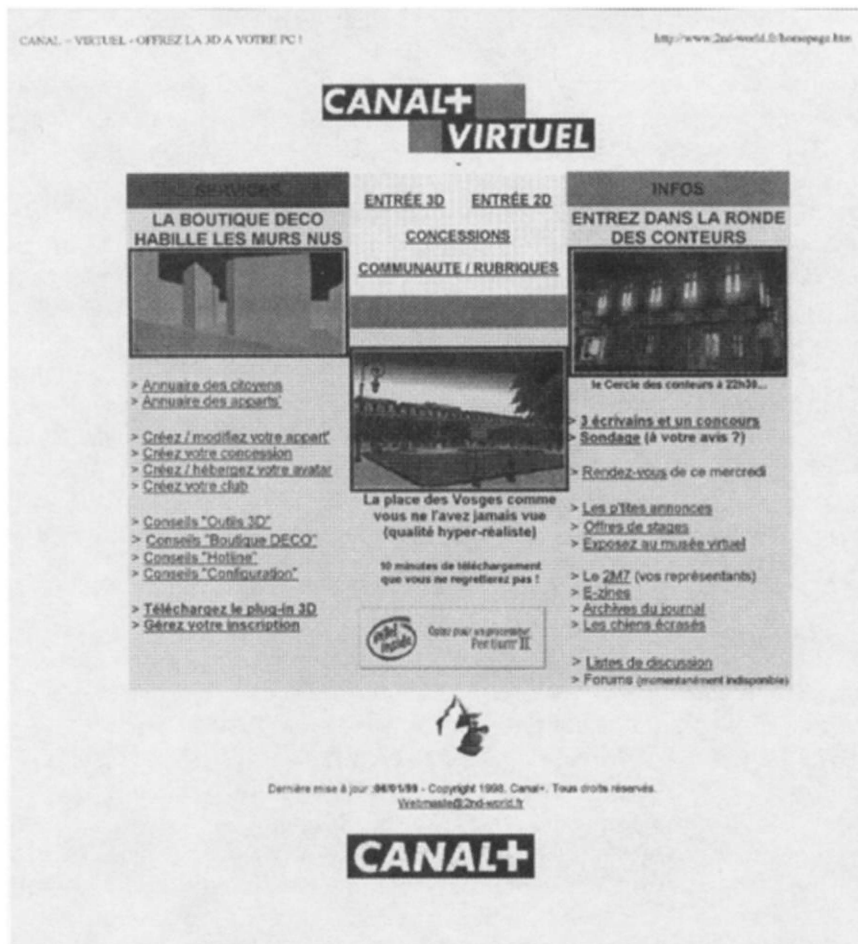
Scène de rue banale: deux amis s'abordent près de Notre-Dame, échantent quelques mots et se séparent. Mais cette rue est bien étrange: pas de voitures, pas de bruit. Aussi loin que porte le regard, Paris apparaît aseptisé, presque vide. Étranges aussi, les deux amis: l'un arbore frac, cravate et souliers fins à la mode des dandys du dix-neuvième siècle; l'autre est engoncé dans une armure de chevalier. Plus curieux encore: en se séparant, les deux amis s'éloignent . . . en lévitation. C'est que ce Paris n'a rien de réel: tout y est numérique, immeubles, monuments, personnages. Il s'agit d'un monde virtuel, le Deuxième Monde ("Pionniers")

Unlike the relatively passive role s/he plays when visiting the Paris websites already discussed, here the francophile internaut is truly engaged; s/he interacts within the hypertextual medium and plays an active role in the city the videogame company, Cryo, and the French cable channel, Canal Plus, have virtualized. S/he occupies, traverses the city, a "Paris modélisée en 3D sur Internet" as an avatar, the virtual presence of a digitally reincarnated, or reinvented self. Philippe Ulrich, who conceived of *Le Deuxième Monde* with Alain Le Diberder of Cryo one night in 1993 over many whiskies in a Monaco bar, explains:

Dans un Paris reconstitué avec ses caractéristiques (on ne trouvera pas les mêmes activités à Pigalle que place de la Bourse), et augmenté de sous-sols à l'inspiration onirique et fantastique, l'utilisateur se déplace en 3 D temps réel, rencontre d'autres utilisateurs connectés. Il possède son appartement, une garde-robe, des objets qu'il a créés lui-même. À terme, il pourra faire ses courses sur le réseau, participer à des clubs, donner un rendez-vous à un ami place du Châtelet . . . Il devient le citoyen d'un cyber-monde. A nous et aux utilisateurs de donner vie à ces rêves. (Lubrano, "Le Cauchemar")

Having downloaded the plug-in Blaxxun needed for negotiation of this reconstituted space-time, and having chosen a pseudonym and graphical interface, one can discover an ever-expanding capital. "Paris s'étend," the website boasts<sup>7</sup>. "Paris est à vous," "A vous de personnaliser tout Paris!" proclaim the pages for anybody interested in "owning" a piece of it: "Thématisez votre concession comme bon vous semble ! Pourquoi pas un quartier à la Blade Runner, Belle au Bois Dormant, Haussmann, Paris années 30 ou encore moyennageux [*sic*] ? Votre imagination est votre seule limite, dans la mesure où elle respecte la charte de construction." Ulrich notes that any time a new building is created, apartments then

Figure 7



become available for rent by companies or individuals. As in the real world, any number of systems of marketing and publicity might evolve as a consequence.

But at what price? In this era of visual saturation, where technology makes it increasingly difficult to develop a faithful image of the city, is it by the confusion, the blurring of the lines between what is virtual and real? At a point in history where, as M. Christine Boyer notes, awareness of the physical space of the city—whether Paris or elsewhere—is actually disappearing or dematerializing (138), is it by substitution of urban space and urban experience with the thousands of pixels displayed relatively

cost-effectively on the computer screen? At this juncture between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and as we incorporate Internet-based activities into our lives, with human confrontation increasingly taking place at the level of the man/machine interface (Virilio 20), urban space furthermore loses its geographical reality in much the same way that in the nineteenth century cities apparently emptied agrarian space of its cultural and social substance. Sherry Turkle therefore asks whether life is being lived on the screen or in the screen (21). Indeed, what might be the image of the city, Boyer wonders, in an increasingly global culture that constitutes itself as an image? How might it change when the public spaces have been usurped by a series of simulations or variations on a theme park—as in *Le Deuxième Monde*—and in which every aspect of metropolitan life seems dictated by the logic of the private market (56, 145, 242)? Will the virtual reality of *Le Deuxième Monde* soon resemble a nightmare or does it deliver us from the nightmare that reality already is? For Ulrich, it is the latter: “Le cauchemar, c’est la réalité. Je ne suis pas un homme de la réalité, sinon, je m’armerais et je prendrais le maquis. On est allés tellement loin dans le chaos que personne ne sait plus par quel bout prendre les choses. Je pense apporter une solution au problème” (“Cauchemar”).

Of course, it remains to be seen whether the rich possibilities of a virtual Paris will emerge as lasting solutions to the realities of the post-print age, where information was stored in bodies of books incorporating their encodings in a durable material substrate (Hayles 73). Will this new, digital city turn out to be like or unlike the old French capital, “un objet complexe . . . une création lente et collective . . . marquée par une histoire dont la durée imaginaire est sans origine” (Roudaut 11)? Will it very rapidly emerge as a faceless city, defined by impermanence? A place that by virtue of its electronic ephemerality will always already be out of date (Ferguson 64)? How easily will its more advanced versions be populated—if only virtually? And to what extent will its potentially billions of global avatars have the power to shape, reshape, or even destroy it?

Manuel Castells emphasizes that while new information technologies fundamentally impact cities like Paris, their effects vary according to the way they interact with the economic, social, political, and cultural processes shaping the production and use of the new technological medium (2). As we strive, indeed struggle in the third millennium to integrate more interactivity in a networked world that for many is still unfamiliar, to find answers and our new place/s and role/s in the Paris of the future and as we move to build, rebuild, and more fully to exploit the new realities between physical and virtual bodies (Turkle), we should think in terms both of a politics and an aesthetics of space (Abbas 443). Finally, if not most importantly, we should never forget the fragility of the Paris that cannot ever entirely be replaced—whether the brick houses in

the Marais, the marble statues of the Palais-Royal garden, the squalid prostitute quarters of the rue Saint-Denis, or the pristine chambers of the Place Vendôme (Hayles 91)—and at least seek to preserve it in some shape or form.<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The universal resource locator (URL) is <<http://www.f-shop.com>>.

<sup>2</sup>The URL is <<http://www.paris-touristoffice.com>>.

<sup>3</sup>The URL is <<http://www.paris.org/parisF.html>>. Although started by Norman Barth, "a private individual, scientist/researcher by trade," as one can read after clicking on the link "Les Pages de Paris FAQ," this site has been supported by the Office de Tourisme de Paris and the French Government Tourist Office/Maison de la France.

<sup>4</sup>The URL is <<http://www.pariswater.com>>.

<sup>5</sup>Thirdvoice, for example, a software program that allows visitors to websites to comment right on the site but without altering the content, has been criticized by many for unnecessarily "cluttering" the World Wide Web (McChesney).

<sup>6</sup>The URL is <<http://www.2nd-world.fr>>.

To date, virtual Paris is conceived of in five categories—one of which further problematizes the time-space of the French capital by extending it to the heavens: recognizable monuments (L'Arc de Triomphe, La Bastille, La Concorde, Le Louvre, L'Opéra, La Place des Vosges, La République, and the Eiffel Tower); the Louvre museum (Le Hall, La Salle Égypte, La Salle Archéologie, La Salle Beaux-Arts, Les Noces de Cana, and Sculpture—and where one is even encouraged to use digital copies of the works on display in one's own virtual Parisian apartment!); theme "parks" (Le Mange Cristal, L'ElseWhere Club, La Croisette, Lunapark, Le Musée, Le Mur d'Expression, Le Patabar, Le P'tit train, La Plage, Plok, Le Théâtre, Les Vestiaires); personal sites (Atlantide, Babylone, Base Alpha, Château, Cité des Arbres, Croisière, Enfer-Paradis, Enterprise, Grand Hall, Halloween, L'Hiver, and Îles Flottantes); and concession stands divided by arrondissement (some of them ranked by a virtual star system). Given the popularity of the Deuxième Monde site, one can only assume that the virtual Paris it showcases will, indeed, "expand."

<sup>7</sup>I am grateful to the *webmestres* of the Paris Tourist Office, Les Pages de Paris, Paris by the Water, and Deuxième Monde sites for permission to reproduce printed copies of their webpages in this article.

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